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NEWS RELEASE

Paul J. McNulty, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, announced that Eric Mario Byers, age 32, of Virginia Beach, Virginia, was sentenced in U.S. District Court in Norfolk today to 360 months in prison for drug and firearms violations. On February 6, 2003, a jury found Byers guilty of seven felony charges including conspiracy to distribute over five kilograms of cocaine, over 50 grams of crack, and possession of an unregistered machine gun. Byers was formerly employed as a custodian by the Virginia Beach public school system.

The federal charges arose out of a narcotics investigation conducted by the Virginia Beach Police Department and the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) under Project Safe Neighborhoods/EXILE. The government's evidence demonstrated that the defendant was receiving large shipments of cocaine and marijuana from suppliers in Southern California by mail and by vehicles being driven from California to Norfolk and Virginia Beach. Byers paid about \$15,000 a kilogram to his suppliers and sold the cocaine locally in bulk for \$23,000 a kilogram. Robert Wingfield of Virginia Beach, who at the time was a teacher in a local high school, was a crack addict who had long purchased crack from Byers, and started assisting Byers in 2000 by picking up packages of drugs for Byers at various addresses to which they had been mailed from California, and by allowing him to store cocaine, crack cocaine, marijuana, and crystal methamphetamine at his house. Wingfield pled guilty to cocaine conspiracy in July, 2002, and was sentenced in October, 2002.

When arrested October 24, 2001, Byers had crack cocaine and paraphernalia for cooking crack at his house, a loaded fully automatic UZI submachinegun, and over \$12,000 cash. Virginia Beach police officers also intercepted a large package containing \$15,000 in cash concealed in a CD radio intended for cocaine suppliers in California as a down payment on a shipment of ten kilos of cocaine.

"Parents have a right to expect those entrusted with the safety and welfare of their children in school to present a model for good citizenship and character. It is especially repugnant when those people become part of the subculture of drug-related crime", said U.S. Attorney McNulty.

Project EXILE is a multi-agency joint federal and state task force targeting armed criminals for prosecution in federal court. It is a part of Project Safe Neighborhoods, a nationwide effort by the Department of Justice aimed at reducing violent crimes. Since its inception locally by the U.S. Attorney in December 1997, Project EXILE has resulted in federal convictions in the Hampton Roads area of over 790 armed criminals whose average sentences exceed nine years and the recovery of over

1,322 firearms as of May 1, 2003. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and U.S. Postal Inspectors offered assistance to the ATF and Virginia Beach Police Department on this case. The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney James A. Metcalfe.